

# Follow the Leader: The Power of Imitating Children on the Autism Spectrum

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If you have a child on the autism spectrum, you may find it difficult to join in with them when they're playing, or to catch their attention when you want to show them something. But when you “follow the leader” by imitating or copying your child, you will discover an easy way to connect with them and get them to notice you.

If you've ever played “Follow the Leader” as a child, you'll remember that one person is the leader, and the others follow along, copying whatever the leader does. You can do the same thing with your child at home, copying their actions, movements, and sounds.

There are many advantages to imitating young children on the autism spectrum:

- **Your child chooses the activity** – because you imitate something that your child is already doing, they are naturally motivated by that toy or activity. Children are more likely to interact when they pick the activity themselves.
- **You and your child share the same focus** – when you are both doing the same thing, it is easier for your child to pay attention to both you and the activity.
- **It helps your child notice you** – when you do exactly the same thing that your child does, it encourages your child to notice what you are doing. Studies have shown that when children on the autism spectrum are imitated, they look at the adult more than if the adult plays with them without imitating (1,2).
- **It promotes other social skills** – besides encouraging children to notice the person imitating them, children on the autism spectrum have also been observed to vocalize, smile, play, sit closer, and touch the adult imitating them (2).
- **It encourages your child to lead** – when your child notices that you are copying them, it might encourage them to perform new actions or try new things in an attempt to get you to copy them again.
- **It encourages your child to imitate you** - imitating others is a particular area of difficulty for children on the autism spectrum (3). The ability to imitate is linked to other skills such as language, and it also helps children learn through observing others (4). Therefore, helping your child to imitate you is an important goal. When you imitate your child, they may notice what you are doing and start to imitate you back.

## How to Imitate your Child

This strategy comes from More Than Words® - The Hanen Program® for Parents of Children on the Autism Spectrum

Imitating your child involves letting go of the lead, which means not telling your child what to do or trying to get them to do something else. Your child is the leader in this copycat game.

Before you imitate your child, you need to...

- **Observe your child** – watch them closely and notice their actions, movements, facial expression and sounds.

Once you have noticed what your child is doing, copy what they do!

- **Imitate his actions, movements, or sounds** – if your child taps on the table, you tap on the table. If they are jumping up and down, you do that too. Or if they are beating on a drum, grab a drumstick and beat the drum too. Copy any sounds your child makes during these activities. Basically, you want to do exactly what your child does.

After you have copied your child, you need to...

- **Wait for your child's reaction** – your child may not notice you the first time. If they don't, copy them again. Or your child may look at you or do the action again. If this is the case, keep copying them. You will eventually get a back-and-forth game of copycat going, when it becomes difficult to tell who is imitating who!!

It makes it easier if you...

- **Have doubles of toys/objects** – some children get upset if you take their toy when it's your turn to imitate. By having your own similar toy or object, your child is less likely to get upset.

You might also want to try to...

- **Imitate your child in front of a mirror** – many children enjoy looking at themselves in the mirror. If you imitate the facial expressions, movements and sounds your child makes while they look in the mirror, they are likely to notice you.

During moments when it seems difficult to get your child's attention and interact with them, imitating them can be very helpful. It is a very simple way to help your child notice you and interact with you. So let go of the lead and let your child be the leader. By playing copycat, you and your child can interact and have fun, and at the same time your child will learn some valuable social skills.

## References

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3. Rogers, S. J., Hepburn, S. L., Stackhouse, T., & Wehner, E. (2003). Imitation performance in toddlers with autism and those with other developmental disorders. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 44, 763-781.
4. Ledford, J. & Wolery, M. (2011). Teaching Imitation to Young Children With Disabilities: A Review of the Literature. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 30 (4), 245-255.

### About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those on the autism spectrum, and those who are developing typically.*

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